

Tips for the Vet Check

(or 'how to look like you know what you're doin')

By Pat Hayward

So here you are. You have worked really hard to get yourself and your horse in condition to tackle a competitive trail ride. Many hours have been spent going up and down the trails, fording streams, tip toeing over rocks, working on keeping a steady pace. Then there is the long trailer ride to the event; finding the 'perfect' camping area; unpacking; checking-in at the Ride Office; and getting your pride and joy groomed for the Veterinarian Inspection. Suddenly your pulse elevates; your chest tightens and you feel like fainting. The dreaded 'Vet Check'. Well with the following tips and lots of practice, there really should be no need for your anxiety level to go sky high.

When at home, familiarize yourself with the vet check procedures. If you do not know what these procedures are, go to the www.bcctra.ca website and look for them under 'Download- Competitors' Form- Scorecards'. The Scorecard indicates what the Veterinarian will be judging. Make sure that your horse is well-groomed and has a well-fitted halter with a 8-10' lead rope. As the handler, you should be tidy-looking as well, since you are 'part of the picture' too.

Now I am going to break this vet check 'thing' into sections. The following is what you can practice at home, during conditioning/training rides and then apply to the real situation:

(A) Approaching the Vet Check area.

DO:

- scan the area to see where/how people are lining up. Ask someone where the back of the line-up is if you are not sure.
- make sure that your horse does not crowd others, or get crowded itself.
- massage your horse's face to help keep it calm if it is showing signs of anxiety.
- watch how the line-up is progressing and maintain your spot.
- watch to figure out how the veterinarian is having the horses trot out.
- Observe the ground conditions for the trot-out and the circle, and notice where the rocks/bumps are so you can do your best to avoid them.
- stay alert and in a quiet frame of mind.
- maintain control of your horse at all times. If your horse is acting up because it is nervous/excited and is upsetting everyone around it (plus putting others in danger), take it some place else and calm it down by walking it around and letting it graze.
- Keep your horse next to its traveling buddy to help keep it calm.

DON'T:

- let your horse wander on a loose lead-rope to graze the Vet Check area.
- let your horse 'visit' with other horses and cause fights.
- start day-dreaming and/or chatting with other competitors so you lose touch with what is happening around you.
- upset the calm of the Vet Check area with loud talk, screeching or yelling.

(B) Presenting your horse to the Vet Once it is your turn to take your horse to the veterinarian, make sure that you present your horse like you would in a Showmanship class.

DO:

- walk towards the veterinarian projecting confidence and pride, and greet them in a friendly manner. Give the Vet Secretary your paperwork (Pulse n' Respiration card and the Score Sheet if it's the Pre-Ride Vet Check).
- have control of your horse with both hands on a not-to-slack lead rope (don't let the lead rope swing or dangle).

- once you reach the vet have your horse stand 'square' (at least in front) with you at the horse's head. Teaching a horse to stand square will take practice especially if your horse has poor ground manners, but persist and most horses usually catch on.
- Stay on the side of the horse that the vet is on. When he/she goes around the horse to the other side, you switch sides. The idea is if the horse moves, you can push it away from the veterinarian.
- Always pay attention to what your horse is doing, and where the veterinarian is positioned, and make sure that your horse is paying attention too. If they are not; oh-so-slightly pinch or tap them on their head to get their attention back on the job.
- The veterinarian will use a rectal thermometer on your horse and a stethoscope. It is highly important to have your horse used to both of these devices, and with being poked and prodded in all sorts of places. Warn the vet if your horse is sensitive in a particular area (esp. hormonal mares).
- Listen to the questions/instructions that the vet gives you. They may ask you about certain lumps/scars/scabs, so be prepared to give them a short but truthful answer. Let the vet know if you have any concerns about your horse's health. They are there to help you have a successful ride, not to punish you, so do not hide important information from them. Your horse's welfare should priority No. 1.
- Keep the horse's neck straight during the 'poke and prod' check; especially when the vet is pinching the neck/shoulder skin for signs of dehydration.

DON'T:

- stand with a loose lead-rope. Keep two hands on it so you are in control of your horse (even if it is standing quietly).
- start chit-chatting/gossiping with bystanders or the veterinarian. The vet has been hired to do a job, quickly and efficiently so don't waste their time and hold up the line.

(C)Trot-out check. This is where horse handlers can really make themselves look foolish and elicit hushed comments from the bystanders like "Sheesh, someone didn't do their homework with that horse." Or "Yup, she needs to lose some weight." (and they're not always talking about the horse either!). At a Vet Check you will be expected to trot your horse in a straight line 125 feet away from the vet; turnaround at a cone, and then trot back to the vet. Near the end of the 125 feet you will be expected to put your horse into a circle in both directions (circles are always done at the Pre-and Post Vet inspections, but also at other Vet Checks if a lameness is suspected).

DO:

- make sure that you are in physical shape to run beside your horse. If you are physically handicapped, then the BCCTRA rules do allow for someone else to trot your horse.
- Listen to the vets instructions as to where they want you to trot your horse.
- Get your horse ready by facing the direction you have to go and squaring the horse up, (at least in front). Scan the ground for rocks and unevenness, and plot your course to avoid tripping (keeping in mind that you need to run a straight course).
- Your lead hand is back, under the horse's jaw, or along side the neck.
- To trot, bring your hand forward. This movement tells the horse it is time to spring into the trot.
- Look up and ahead. Muster within yourself energy and a "kick-ass" attitude, and project that to your horse. Most of the time they'll pick up on that and will respond with more energy.
- Look where you are going and give verbal command "and trot". Go in the direction you are looking which is a straight line away from the Veterinarian toward the end of the 125 foot run.
- Trot at a pace that is comfortable for the horse (not too slow or too fast).
- Stop quickly at the turnaround point, walk calmly and quietly around the cone, always turning the horse to the right.

- Make sure the horse has gone around the cone and is straight; walk three paces and give the verbal command “and trot”; then resume trotting back the way you came. Maintain that “kick-ass” attitude and don’t lose it during this process.
- Look up and trot to the veterinarian in a straight line.
- About 10 feet from the vet start your circle to the left. When doing the circles, you have two choices: you can lunge your horse at the end of your lead rope with you jogging on the inside of the circle; or you can run right beside your horse. Either way, try to create a large enough circle so that your horse has room to move out. If you do not have your horse trot a large enough circle, it will not move out properly. This is where many people experience difficulties with their horses.
- Maintain the momentum from the straight trot-out into the circles. Keep that “kick-ass” attitude going!
- Once you have completed the counter-clockwise circle, stop the horse, turn it around and have it do a complete circle clockwise. If you are running right beside your horse you will be on the horse’s left side and will have to work hard to stay beside its neck. This is why many handlers are opting to lunge their horses instead of run beside them. But it’s your choice- whatever makes your horse look great for the vet.
- When your final circle is complete, stop and walk your horse over to the vet and square it up again.
- Maintain control of your horse all the time.

DON’T:

- allow your horse to fall behind you so you are ‘dragging’ it. This will make your horse appear listless and dull, and will probably cost you points.
- look back at your horse or stare it in the eye, as that is an aggressive act.
- look down at the ground while trotting your horse except to quickly access ground conditions and make sure you do not stumble.
- hit your horse to make it trot out properly. If you do this, it just conveys the wrong message to the Vet.

Once the veterinarian has indicated that he/she has finished inspecting your horse, thank them. Do not forget to reward your horse with a job well done (pat or a kind word), then quickly and quietly move away from the area, giving the other contestants and their horses a wide berth. Be careful to keep an eye on what other people are doing (or not doing) with their horses. You do not want to get into a crowded situation and risk injury right after successfully passing a Vet Check. Sometimes you will need to be assertive and say “Heads up... coming through!” People usually appreciate the warning and the opportunity to move their horses so no one gets hurt.

In conclusion, always keep in mind that as the horse’s handler, you are ultimately responsible for keeping it under control. Make sure you are familiar with the Vet Check procedures and the rules & regulations of the BCCTRA. Try to attend a BCCTRA Schooling Ride to learn the basics of competitive trail riding. Practice the procedures in your backyard at home and after conditioning/training rides until you are confident that your horse is ready to participate in a competitive trail ride. If you still have doubts about your horse, keep in mind that there is no shame in contacting a more experienced horseman and/or hiring a professional trainer to teach you and your horse the finer points of showmanship. It is always better to be safe than sorry.

Happy Trails!

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